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Article (Published Version)

Delabre, Izabela, Alexander, Anthony and Rodrigues, Camila (2019) Strategies for tropical forest protection and sustainable supply chains: challenges and opportunities for alignment with the UN sustainable development goals. Sustainability Science. pp. 1-15. ISSN 1862-4065 (Accepted)

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SPECIAL FEATURE: ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Exploring Interactions among the Sustainable Development Goals: Case Studies from Three Continents

# Strategies for tropical forest protection and sustainable supply chains: challenges and opportunities for alignment with the UN sustainable development goals

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Received: 14 January 2019 / Accepted: 18 October 2019  
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## Abstract

Governance for sustainable development increasingly involves diverse stakeholder groups, with the promise of enhanced legitimacy and effectiveness in decision-making and implementation. The UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) emphasise the important role of multiple (non-state) actors, including businesses and non-governmental organisations, including in efforts to ensure the sustainability of supply chains, and to reduce tropical deforestation and forest degradation. This paper critically analyses sustainability strategies to examine how the UN SDG agendas related to ‘sustainable supply chains’ and ‘tropical forest protection’ are framed and enacted by two contrasting non-state actors: (1) Instituto Centro de Vida (ICV), an NGO in Brazil working to address deforestation, including by supporting farmers to produce commodities, and (2) Unilever, a global consumer goods manufacturer and major buyer of such commodities. By identifying areas of variability in the discursive techniques used by ICV and Unilever, we unearth particular power dynamics that can shape the processes and outcomes of sustainability strategies. This paper finds that the two organisations use diverse strategies at different levels of governance, both participate actively in multi-stakeholder forums to advance their organisations’ goals, but have divergent framings of ‘sustainability’. Despite being considered ‘non-state’ actors, the strategies of the two organisations examined both reflect, and influence, the structural effects of the state in the implementation of non-state organisations’ strategies, and progress towards the SDGs. Although there is alignment of certain strategies related to tropical forest protection, in some cases, there is a risk that more sustainable, alternative approaches to governing forests and supply chains may be excluded.

**Keywords** Sustainable supply chain management · UN sustainable development goals · Tropical forest protection · Sustainability · Non-state governance

## Introduction: deforestation and the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs)

UN sustainable development goal (SDG) 15.2 seeks to “promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests, and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally” (UN General Assembly 2015). As market demands for food, fuel, and fibre are the most significant drivers of tropical deforestation and degradation, SDG 15.2 interacts with other SDGs (Stafford Smith et al. 2018), such as increasing agricultural productivity (SDG 2), promoting the integration of small-scale business into value chains and markets (SDG 9), and ensuring sustainable production and

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consumption patterns (SDG 12). Insufficient attention to the synergies and tensions between the Goals could hamper their implementation, and present unintended and undesirable impacts and trade-offs (Bengtsson et al. 2018; Nilsson et al. 2016; Timko et al. 2018).

In recent years, combinations of actors have come together to set targets for tackling deforestation. During the 2014 UN Secretary-General's Climate Summit, the New York Declaration on Forests was launched—a partnership of governments, multinational companies, civil society, and indigenous peoples—with the aim of at least halving the rate of loss of natural forests globally by 2020 and striving to end natural forest loss by 2030. By 2017, over 477 companies had made zero deforestation commitments for their commodity sourcing practices (Donofrio et al. 2017). Zero deforestation movements also emerged at country-level, for example, in Brazil (Instituto de Pesquisa Ambiental da Amazônia 2017; Matsumoto et al. 2018).

Despite the adoption of global commitments by diverse alliances of actors to protect tropical forests, tropical deforestation, and degradation continue, with 15.8 million hectares of tropical tree cover loss recorded in 2017 (WRI 2018). If unabated, tropical deforestation and degradation erode social–ecological resilience at local and global scales (Folke et al. 2005), with the potential to trigger self-amplifying feedbacks and regime shifts (Nobre and Borma 2009).

In this paper, we examine how the agendas of ‘sustainable supply chains’ (reflected in SDGs 2 and 12) and ‘tropical forest protection’ (SDG 15) are framed and enacted at different levels, and by different actors. We analyse the discourse associated with strategies—related to deforestation, supply chains and the SDGs—undertaken by: (1) Instituto Centro de Vida (ICV), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) seeking to simultaneously improve the productivity and sustainability of farming organisations in Mato Grosso, Brazil, and (2) Unilever, a global consumer goods manufacturer operating globally, committed to sustainable commodity sourcing. The two organisations thus represent different actors in environmental governance, focusing on sustainability from different ends of commodity supply chains.

We identify areas of variability in the discursive techniques used by Unilever and ICV, which represent particular dynamics of power that shape the processes and outcomes of sustainability strategies. We thus contribute to a better understanding of the (diverse) roles of (and within) MNEs and NGOs in relation to the SDGs, and how their strategies interact with the state. We seek to understand where there is alignment and potential friction between priorities, and interactions between global and local dynamics. Our research questions examine:

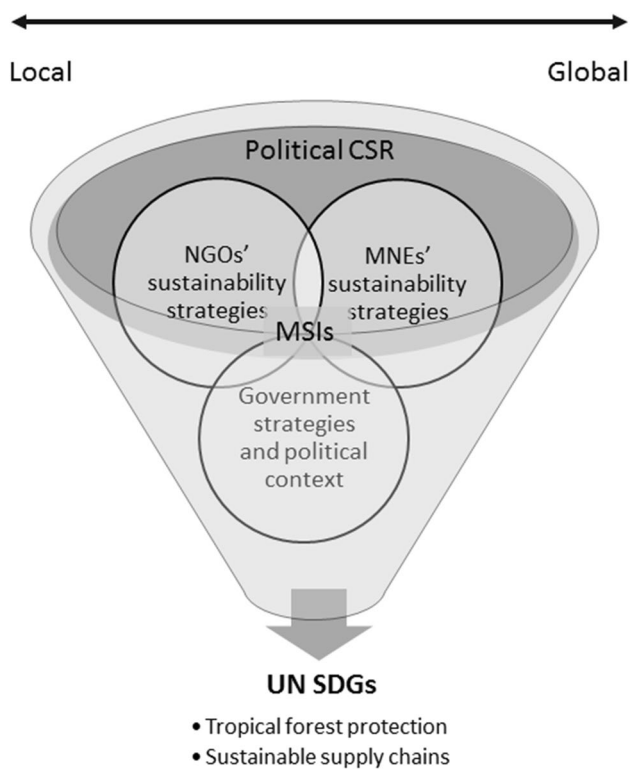
1. To what extent do the sustainability strategies of ICV and Unilever align with the UN SDGs?
2. To what extent do the sustainability strategies of ICV and Unilever align with each other?
3. What is the role of the state in relation to the sustainability strategies of ICV and Unilever?

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section presents a conceptual framework focusing on multi-actor governance for sustainability. The methodology is then presented, including an introduction to the two organisations studied. We then discuss our findings, including: (1) multi-scale and diverse sustainability strategies undertaken by ICV and Unilever; (2) how the organisations engage with multi-stakeholder initiatives; and (3) framings of sustainability. This paper concludes with some recommendations for future research, and for policy and practice.

## Multi-actor governance for sustainability

Processes of deregulation, privatisation, and globalisation, and the restructure of supply chains, have resulted in a shift towards ‘governance without government’ with non-state actors, including businesses and NGOs gaining functions “that have historically been the task of governments, most notably that of regulating the negative externalities of economic activity” (Mayer and Gereffi 2010: 1; Cashore 2002; Buckingham and Jepson 2013). Although Governments have ultimate responsibility for reporting against the SDGs, multiple stakeholders are integral to their implementation, including: “the UN system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community—and all people” (UN General Assembly 2015). This reflects contemporary discourse in sustainable development governance which emphasises the importance of public–private and civil society partnerships (Stibbe et al. 2019), with the potential to bridge multilateral norms and local action by drawing on a diverse number of actors in civil society, government and business (Bäckstrand 2006). It is considered that stakeholder engagement is needed, where there are plural interpretations of a problem that is not conducive to linear and knowable cause and effect relationships (Alexander et al. 2018).

With private actors being fundamental to the development and delivery of the SDGs (van Zanten and van Tulder 2018), certain discursive framings are represented in the setting and implementation of the SDGs, and these deserve greater attention. Business and NGOs are seen as assuming political roles to address ‘governance gaps’ through a process of ‘political CSR’ (Scherer and Palazzo 2007, 2011) (see Fig. 1). An important process through which companies and



**Fig. 1** Conceptual diagram of the political roles of companies and NGOs in relation to forest and supply chain sustainability governance

NGOs take on political roles—with the promise of inclusivity and participation to reduce risks of marginalisation (Schouten et al. 2012)—is through Multi-stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) for sustainability.

MSIs can be based on ‘private’ certification models (e.g., the Forest Stewardship Council), or promote broader principles (e.g., the UN Global Compact) (de Bakker et al. 2019). MSIs can include initiatives in which governments are excluded (e.g., the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil), or where governments are active stakeholders (e.g., the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative). The recent emergence of ‘jurisdictional’ certification reflects a changing role of the state in ‘private’ certification standards. Through jurisdictional approaches, both public and private incentives are combined to ensure complementarity between public and private actors (Lambin and Thorlakson 2018; Nepstad et al. 2014), where states have previously been absent from (private) multi-stakeholder settings (e.g., the State Government of Sabah, Malaysia, adopted a jurisdictional (state-wide) programme for RSPO certification).

Proponents of ‘political CSR’ propose that business participates in a pluralist framework, aligned with Habermas’ (1996) concept of deliberative democracy (Scherer and Palazzo 2007). As noted by Levy et al. (2016), there is wide optimism that the shift from state authority to more flexible,

multi-site and multi-level networks of non-state actors has had positive results, assuming that governance with diverse stakeholders promises greater accountability, efficiency, problem-solving capacity, and participation. However, critical scholars suggest that such a view of political CSR neglects attention to power dynamics that undermine ideals of deliberative democracy, and ways in which business gains an advantage and practices legitimised when challenged by NGOs (Banerjee 2003; Levy et al. 2016). Corporate strategies and value chain certifications have the potential to create new dependencies and exclusions for already marginalised actors (Loconto 2015; McCarthy et al. 2018; Cheyns 2014; Ponte and Cheyns 2013; Nelson and Tallontire 2014). As multiple actors enter the sustainability governance process, new challenges emerge, such as how to facilitate innovative interactions and balance interests among actors, and incorporate diverse knowledge and values (Shiroyama et al. 2012).

There is increasing critical attention to the involvement of the state in endorsing and participating in multi-stakeholder initiatives and product certification (Schrempf-Stirling 2018; Bartley 2014). However, much of the political CSR literature still uses a dichotomous conceptualisation of state and non-state spheres. Lambin and Thorlakson (2018) argue that understanding how private and public policies interact will help to design more effective sustainability interventions. Here, ‘the state’ can be conceptualised as a “structural effect” (Mitchell 1991: 81) that results from and produces effects through interactions between intra-state, extra-state and non-state actors (Marijnen and Verweijen 2018). Likewise, the ‘public sector’ may also represent certain private interests through ‘public–private partnerships’, and NGOs can represent private sector interests through emerging alliances.

We contrast the framings, strategies, and actions of Unilever and ICV, in relation to the SDGs. By critically examining these processes at local and global levels, we contribute to understanding of alignment and potential frictions between priorities, and interactions between global and local dynamics of environmental governance through strategies for tropical forest protection and sustainable supply chains.

## Methodology

Discourse analysis appreciates the plural and contested perspectives that constitute sustainable development policy processes (Sharp and Richardson 2001), and can be used to better understand the meaning, interpretation and implementation of sustainable development (Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Hugé et al. 2013). Studying discourse can reveal how diverse stakeholders interpret, and potentially influence the problem and its solution (Martinez-Harms et al. 2018; Bäckstrand

and Lövbrand 2006; Escobar 2011), through a process of active ‘positioning’ of themselves and others (Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Reinecke and Ansari 2015). We focus on discourse as a temporary fixation of meaning, where power is exercised to challenge or keep power, thus serving particular interests (Fischer and Hajdu 2017). Through this process, certain discourses may be ‘closed down’ to retain hegemony through the reinterpretation of a problem and how it should be solved, and thus which interests should be taken into account (Fischer and Hajdu 2017; Thackaberry 2004).

To explore approaches to tropical forest protection and sustainable supply chains taken at the local and global levels by different actors, we undertook critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2009) to examine the strategies and discursive framings used by two different institutions: (1) a Brazilian NGO, ICV, operating in the state of Mato Grosso and (2) Unilever, a large multi-national consumer goods company operating on a global scale. These two organisations are juxtaposed, as they focus on sustainability from different ends of supply chains or at different ‘nodes’ of ‘global commodity networks’<sup>1</sup> (Oosterveer 2015) with ICV supporting farmers in producing commodities in forest landscapes, and Unilever having sustainable sourcing policies for the commodities it buys on a global scale. The two organisations thus represent different actors in environmental governance, embedded in multi-scalar regulatory contexts involving local and national authorities, multilateral institutions and private actors (Oosterveer 2015). Understanding these organisations, and their discursive practices and strategies, and interactions with the state, sheds light on their strengths and limitations to contributing to the SDGs.

First, we analyse the strategies taken by the Brazilian NGO ICV in its projects working with local agricultural communities to support the development of sustainable supply chains and promote tropical forest protection. We undertake critical discourse analysis of information publicly available on ICV’s website, and project documents and data (ranging from 2017 to 2018) shared with the authors bilaterally and translated from Brazilian Portuguese. A series of interviews conducted with staff members of ICV (2018–2019) helped us to understand knowledge flows within the organisation, how the organisation interacts with other stakeholders operating in the landscape of Mato Grosso, approaches taken by individuals, and challenges encountered.

Second, critical discourse analysis of Unilever’s zero deforestation and sustainable supply chains strategies was undertaken, based on the publically available information on Unilever’s website, publicly available interviews, presentations, media reports, triangulated with reports by third parties. The research team approached Unilever for an interview, but the researchers were directed to publicly available documents to answer specific questions regarding Unilever’s sustainable sourcing strategy and approaches to the SDGs. To analyse alignment and tensions between organisations, we focused on broad organisational sustainability strategies, and also sustainability strategies specifically related to cocoa products. An extensive review of academic and grey literature was also undertaken, related to the SDGs, forests and sustainability, and sustainable supply chain strategies.

First, our discourse analysis involved exploring the contexts of the two organisations studied. We collected extensive documents and interview statements based on the research questions, and used open coding to code the data thematically, and were thus able to explore the range of ideological positions taken by actors, how different actors were represented in the discourse, and how the themes linked back to socio-political context (Fairclough 2001; O’Halloran 2011). We analysed the connections between codes and examined ways in which discourses were filled with meaning which excluded alternative meanings, paying attention to digressive statements and rhetorical mechanisms.

### Case 1: Instituto Centro de Vida (ICV)

ICV is an NGO operating in Brazil focusing on sustainable land and natural resource use. ICV was selected as a case study to better understand the regional and local level strategies and contextual challenges in implementing sustainable development initiatives. ICV has historically worked with the state government of Mato Grosso as a key partner in monitoring deforestation and providing public accountability.<sup>2</sup> ICV is active in a multi-stakeholder initiative, PCI ‘Produzir, Conservar, Incluir’ (Produce, Conserve, Include) which aims to reconcile “sustainable low carbon production with environmental conservation and social productive inclusion, contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation” (ICV 2019a). The initiative is based on a jurisdictional approach, in which public, private, and civil society stakeholders across the state of Mato Grosso set and implement joint targets for production of soy and beef, conservation of forest cover, and inclusion of all segments of society.

In ICV’s separate Social Business Programme, the NGO works with 20 grassroots organisations of family farms in north and northwest Mato Grosso to support people to

<sup>1</sup> Global commodity networks are ‘buyer-driven’, as they are controlled by a small number of large Western food retailers and manufacturers, such as Unilever (Gereffi 1994). Despite being an NGO, ICV is considered to be enrolled into a global commodity network through its engagement with small-scale farmers and large companies producing commodities.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with ICV, December 2018.



transition to more sustainable, agroecological practices in fruit and vegetable, milk, coffee, cocoa, brazil nuts, and Babaçu palm (a Brazilian palm that yields an edible oil) value chains,<sup>3</sup> while simultaneously conserving forest and biodiversity. The project provides families, associations, and cooperatives with technical assistance and investments to develop sustainable livelihoods through harvesting non-timber products, with the aim of improving their wellbeing and income. The aim is also to provide local people with more power in negotiations with buyers and to support the notion that sustainable value chains are more economically attractive than conventional practices in Mato Grosso, where deforestation leads to conversion to plantations of commodity crops or pasture for livestock (Michalski et al. 2010; Godar et al. 2012).

## Case 2: Unilever

Unilever was selected as a case study, as it is a large global transnational company, which owns 400 brands, has global strategies for agricultural commodity sourcing, and positions itself as a leader in sustainability (Bakker 2018). The Unilever Sustainable Living Plan guides the company's business model, and has three large goals: "Help more than a billion people to improve their health and wellbeing, halve the environmental footprint of our products, source 100% of our agricultural raw materials sustainably and enhance the livelihoods of people across our value chain" (Unilever 2019a).

Unilever participates actively in multiple initiatives aimed at cross-sector sustainability (e.g., World Business Council for Sustainable Development, United Nations Global Compact), and sector-specific sustainability networks and roundtables (e.g., Ethical Tea Partnership, and helped to establish the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil), and public-private partnerships in countries in which ingredients are sourced. Unilever is recognized by the Dow Jones Sustainability Index as the leader of the Personal Products category (September 2018), and through its Sustainable Living Plan, the company has been able to demonstrate long-term shareholder value to its investors. In the context of the SDGs, Unilever boldly refers to 'rebooting capitalism', and states, "We believe that it is not possible to achieve long-term business success in a world which contains poverty, hunger and climate change" (Unilever 2019b).

## Findings and discussion

The sections that follow discuss the main themes that emerge from the discourse analysis, including: (1) multi-scale and diverse sustainability strategies undertaken by ICV and Unilever; (2) organisations' engagement with multi-stakeholder initiatives; and (3) framing of sustainability. Through this analysis, we examine how strategies align with the SDGs, how implementation interacts with the state at different levels, and how variability between different stakeholders' approaches supports, or presents challenges for achieving the SDGs.

### Multi-scale and diverse sustainability strategies

Table 1 summarises how ICV and Unilever's stated strategies contribute to agendas of 'sustainable supply chains' and 'tropical forest protection.' The organisations use diverse strategies to try to decouple commodity production from deforestation through a range of initiatives focusing across multiple scales of governance. ICV focuses on programs at local and state levels (Table 1), including: (1) Social Business Program (including a project on developing sócio-productive networks); (2) Environmental Transparency Program; (3) Social Environmental Rights Program; and (4) Economic incentives for Conservation Program (including involvement in the PCI and Livestock initiatives). ICV is also well-connected with international actors and processes through impact investment funds (Althelia 2019), and through a working group of the global Accountability Framework Initiative,<sup>4</sup> demonstrating telecoupled global links and blurring the distinctions between local and global governance.

Likewise, although Unilever primarily employs 'global' strategies through the promotion of certification and its (global and standardised) Sustainable Agriculture Code, the company is also active in influencing numerous local-level projects. Unilever states that its projects are aimed at 746,000 smallholder farmers, with 18 projects in 11 different countries (Unilever 2019j). Although Unilever's Sustainable Agriculture Code (2017a) is applied at a global level, the company does also acknowledge the heterogeneity of farming systems (Table 2). The company states that it is involved in helping to catalyse "transformative change at the *landscape or jurisdictional level* in key regions of South-East Asia, South America, and West and Central Africa" (emphasis added) (Table 1). Unilever is also a signatory the Cocoa & Forests Initiative (CFI), a public-private partnership, organised by the World Cocoa Foundation (WCF), IDH—the Sustainable Trade Initiative, and the Prince of Wales's

<sup>3</sup> Fruit and vegetables are for local consumption, and other value chains are for regional or eventually international consumption.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with ICV, December 2018.

**Table 1** Approaches to ‘sustainable supply chains’ and ‘tropical forest protection’ by ICV and Unilever

Agenda	Contributions to SDG agendas by organisation	
	ICV	Unilever
Sustainable supply chains	<p>The socio-productive networks<sup>a</sup> project aims to strengthen farmers’ groups and their sustainable production practices for six commodities, and maintain forests. Focus on improving quality and productivity, diversification of production, restoring degraded areas, providing farmer training, strengthening dialogue, knowledge-sharing, governance of the productive chains, and promoting products/marketing</p> <p>Sustainable Livestock Initiative promotes best practices (reducing pressure for expansion into forest areas, reversing environmental degradation and increasing the quality of production and income). ICV’s work on the traceability and economic and environmental sustainability of meat value chain led to collaboration with numerous organisations including JBS and McDonalds in the Novo Campo Program (ICV 2019b)</p> <p>Social Business Programme supports rural communities in collaborative land management, development, use and diffusion of production and processing technologies appropriate to local realities, based on agroecology (ICV 2019c)</p>	<p>Sustainable living plan: the company’s commitment to decouple its growth from its environmental footprint, while increasing its positive social impact (Unilever 2019a)</p> <p>Sustainably sourced (Unilever 2019a, b, c, d) requires products to be either: certified (under rainforest alliance (sustainable agriculture network standard), Fairtrade, Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (Unilever 2019e), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), any organic standard recognised by IFOAM and PEFC for paper and board (Unilever 2019f); or to meet requirements of Unilever’s Sustainable Agriculture Code (Unilever 2017a)</p> <p>Unilever Supplier Qualification System: suppliers are assessed against Unilever’s Responsible Sourcing Policy (Unilever, 2017b)</p> <p>Provision of Sustainable Sourcing tools (Unilever, 2019g) to suppliers (e.g., Cool Farm Tool, Pesticide Risk Management profiling tool, EIGER maps—to identify new supply chains routes—that give detailed information about agricultural raw materials, biodiversity, water, GDP and population)</p> <p>Provision of global collaboration platform for Unilever’s suppliers to improve commercial and operational performance (SupplierNet) (Unilever 2019h)</p> <p>Smallholder projects: such as ASPEN project (Côte d’Ivoire), supported by TRANSFORM (a joint initiative between Unilever and the UK’s Department for International Development), and Cargill (Unilever 2019j)</p> <p>Enhancing Livelihoods Fund (ELF) (an initiative between Unilever, Oxfam and the Ford Foundation), supporting projects (including cocoa)</p>
Tropical forest protection	<p>Environmental Transparency Program (ICV 2019d): promotes improvements in state forest management, monitoring implementation and strengthening social inclusion. ICV actively evaluates the main processes and practices of forest management, point out deficiencies and proposing changes or new mechanisms, valuing social inclusion</p> <p>The Economic Incentives for Conservation Program (ICV, 2019e): promotes economic incentives for the conservation of forests and the adoption of best agricultural and forestry practices</p> <p>Work in partnership with industry, governments, non-governmental organisations and multi-stakeholder organisations through PCI initiative (ICV 2019f)</p> <p>Climate funding (Althelia 2019)</p> <p>Accountability framework initiative</p>	<p>Corporate investment in commercial projects for deforestation-free agriculture (Andgreen Fund 2019)</p> <p>Traceability and sustainability certification for palm oil, soy, paper and board, beef and tea</p> <p>Working with ‘the whole industry’ to go ‘beyond certification’, ‘creating a movement’</p> <p>Work with industry partners, governments, non-governmental organisations and multi-stakeholder organisations, e.g., membership of TFA 2020, Cerrado Manifesto signatories (Tropical Forest Alliance 2020 2019; Consumer Goods Forum 2017)</p> <p>Requirements for suppliers in Sustainable Agriculture Code, including the prohibited conversion of high conservation value/high ecological value/high carbon stock areas (forests, grasslands or wetlands) to farmland and “if some forest has to be destroyed, for example for road building, the loss shall be compensated for” (to achieve “zero-net-deforestation”)</p> <p>Helping catalyse “transformative change at the landscape or jurisdictional level in key regions of South-East Asia, South America, and West and Central Africa” (Unilever 2019i)</p>

<sup>a</sup>Internal project documents shared by ICV

International Sustainability Unit (ISU). The governments of Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana and the world’s leading cocoa and chocolate companies agreed to develop a framework for deforestation free and forest positive supply chain and to develop alignment between sustainability strategies and public policy (Unilever 2019k).

Well-aligned with the language of the SDGs, Unilever’s Sustainable Living Plan (Unilever 2019) refers to its scale in relation to its potential for ‘transformational’, systemic change (Table 2, Q1). The company’s language around inclusivity, and its partnership with governments, clearly indicate its agenda of promoting ‘agriculture for development’

through its scale. Despite this language of inclusivity and ambition to drive transformative change thanks to its scale, the ('lack of') scale of the company is also used by Unilever to justify its limited progress to meet its goals, thus making the concept of 'scale' a floating signifier or discursive commodity, which can be filled with meaning that supports the organisation as deemed necessary, such as when justifying a lack of progress, or strengthening its position as sustainability leader (Table 2, Q1–3).

The complexity of supply chains and lack of oversight of potentially 'unsustainable' farmers (Q3) are recognised as important reasons for the lack of effective implementation of strategies. Such a narrative also aligns with dominant discourse that small-scale farmers are responsible for deforestation or unsustainable practices; despite evidence that even in cases (such as in Brazil) when small-scale agriculture does primarily drive deforestation, other processes such as land consolidation, plantation development, and large-scale ranching become more significant deforestation drivers over time (Godar et al. 2012; Ravikumar et al. 2017). The dominance of such narratives can potentially obscure the development of more diverse and potentially more appropriate policy mixes that more adequately target drivers of deforestation.

As ICV primarily operates at a local level, the NGO felt that as an organisation it better understands the specific landscapes and context than multinational enterprises (MNEs), highlighting that a single producer in Mato Grosso is very far away from the end product with a complex supply chain. ICV, therefore, felt acutely aware of the frustrations and discontent faced by producers of commodities in having to implement zero deforestation commitments with little perceived incentive. According to ICV, producers feel as though buyers are not taking responsibility for implementation of commitments to zero deforestation (Table 2, Q8).

This poses an important challenge for ICV in trying to implement an agenda that is seen as non-market friendly by producers. Despite the positive intentions of buyers in making zero deforestation commitments, NGOs and producers are 'responsibilised' for the implementation of global environmental governance (Goldman 2001), thus representing new tensions between actors and strategies, and between local and global levels of governance. Furthermore, the most difficult and complex decisions—made at global levels or by downstream supply chain actors—are delegated to local actors. For example, while slaughterhouses have some control over their direct beef suppliers, they have no influence on their indirect suppliers, and demand for the commodity remains unchanged (Table 2, Q10). Without engaging more directly in local contextual conditions, Unilever and other MNEs may face risks of indirect impacts of deforestation.

Furthermore, if suppliers are simply excluded from certain supply chains, demand still continues, there may still

be possibilities to sell commodities to other buyers. The process of exclusion can also cause spillover effects in the landscape or to other biomes, such as the unintended negative impacts observed in the Cerrado landscape after the Soy Moratorium was implemented in the Amazon in 2006 (Dou et al. 2018). If production is pushed to areas with higher conservation value, greater damage can be caused than business as usual in the original location (Carrasco et al. 2014). These complex decisions present important dilemmas for local actors, who are faced with implementing a 'global' sustainable sourcing agenda in the context of complex local realities and risks of spillover. Despite 'global' initiatives that promise to drive change at scale, the messy processes of implementation are delegated to local actors.

Local organizations have an important role in supporting changes on the ground, but these changes come at a cost, which ICV believes should be supported by all supply chain actors, to effectively scale up. To help address these disconnects between levels of governance, and ICV suggests that global actors and frameworks should ensure that buyers downstream support with the implementation of zero deforestation commitments and share responsibility (Table 2, Q9).

However, changing political contexts have important implications on the work of NGOs in striving to implement change on the ground. According to ICV, since election campaigns at the federal and state levels, the NGO is increasingly encountering a context of polarisation and resistance. In Brazil more broadly, a shift in the political environment has resulted in reinforced discourse about NGOs impeding development in the name of conservation, posing an important constraint on the work of NGOs such as ICV. At the time of writing, it was observed that the government was legitimizing and legalising an anti-environmental discourse, including a move away from global commitments, such as UN emissions reduction targets (Alencastro 2019). This anti-NGO discourse is also reflected in measures to supervise and monitor NGOs throughout Brazil (Maisonave 2019). Standing up for the environment and promoting sustainable value chains is not well-received in Mato Grosso, and discourse that is supportive of deforestation and unsustainable production practices (promoted by larger farmers and now government) is echoed in broader public attitudes.

## Engagement with multiple stakeholders

Unilever is an active participant in numerous multi-stakeholder initiatives and forums (see Table 1), and identifies this type of collaboration as an important strategy in its Sustainable Living Plan. SDG 17 emphasises the need for partnerships for the goals, demonstrating clear alignment between Unilever's discourse and the SDGs. Through its



**Table 2** Discursive themes identified and representative quotes

	Organisation	Discursive themes	Representative quotes	Source
Q1	Unilever	Large scale, transformational change	“by using our scale, working with partners and harnessing advocacy, we believe we can help drive transformational change in these global systems while improving the sustainability of our own agricultural raw materials”	Unilever (2019a)
Q2		Agriculture for development, inclusivity	“By connecting us to millions of people in farming communities, our agricultural supply chain will be central to achieving the social ambitions of our Unilever Sustainable Living Plan—for example, by creating inclusive supply chains for the smallholder farmers who produce around 80% of the food consumed in emerging markets from Southern Asia to sub-Saharan Africa”	Unilever (2019a)
Q3		Lack of scale, small farmers unsustainable, lack of visibility	“...we are unable to reach our target by 2020 despite the considerable advances we’ve made. This is partly because of our lack of scale to achieve sufficient change across all crops. And partly because the length and complexity of some supply chains make it very difficult to develop a line of sight on the farmers at the very beginning of that supply chain, and thus to reassure ourselves that their practices are sustainable”	Unilever (2019a)
Q4		Standardisation	“We expect all our suppliers of agricultural raw materials to commit to joining the sustainability journey and to demonstrate that they agree to minimum standards of performance and to continuously improve performance over time”	Unilever (2017a)
Q5		Recognising heterogeneity	“...farming is rarely the same in two places—so while we have a shared set of standards, our approach can look very different from one farmyard to another”	Unilever (2019l)
Q6		Participation in MSIs, collaboration, SDGs	“Working in collaboration with others is so crucial—between businesses, customers, suppliers, governments, academia and NGOs—all key to driving the more sustainable form of capitalism that the SDGs demand”	Murray (2018)
Q7		Systemic constraints	“Like all businesses, we are impacted by the increasingly short-term focus of financial markets and political systems”	Murray (2018)
Q8	ICV	Lack of interest by buyers, lack of incentive	“There are feelings of buyers losing interest since 2015 and signing up to the New York Declaration on Forests—they have set zero deforestation targets but the implementation of these commitments is very slow and still only discussed at very high level. For the producers on the ground, barely nothing has changed, so no change in behaviour is perceived and incentivized”	Interview with ICV, 2018
Q9		Global actors responsible for sustainability	“It is important that global level frameworks, such as the Accountability Framework Initiative (in which ICV has played a role in the working group on definitions), Tropical Forest Alliance etc. help companies implement their zero deforestation supply chain commitments addressing differently the small farmer suppliers and prevent them from promoting their exclusion. Furthermore, even if a company cannot see the small farmers on their monitoring, they are still connected somehow in the supply chain and in the landscape”	Interview with ICV, 2018

**Table 2** (continued)

Organisation	Discursive themes	Representative quotes	Source
Q10	Limits of supply chain initiative to address demand	“Even if they start monitoring their indirect suppliers, studies show that they could not exclude all indirect suppliers involved with deforestation because there will be not enough compliant farms with production to supply what is needed, so how would they stop it?”	Interview with ICV, 2018
Q11	Participation in MSIs, collaboration, pragmatism	“As an institution that believes in the power of dialogue and collective construction of solutions for driving meaningful change, ICV participates and promotes such initiatives but always focusing on effectiveness, monitoring and transparency aiming to avoid and reduce risks of contributing to ‘green-washing Mato Grosso’”	Interview with ICV, 2018
Q12	Contextual constraint, state, data	“PCI set a target around achieving technical assistance and rural extension for all family farms in the state, which translated to “Technical assistance and rural extension coverage (ATER) to 100% of family farms by 2030”. Because of the data held by the state on the number of families is not updated annually as is the number of families with assistance, the numbers in some municipalities ended up translating to a larger number of assisted families than there were families (i.e. there was a coverage of 120%)”	Interview with ICV, 2018

public–private partnerships for sustainability, and through its engagement in forums in which governments are also participants, Unilever interacts with multiple stakeholders at multiple scales. However, at a global level, Unilever acknowledges the systemic and structural constraints in its ability to drive ‘transformative change’ (Table 2, Q7).

At the state level, ICV realises that it has an important role to play in the multi-stakeholder PCI project, to grant legitimacy to the initiative by focusing on the impacts, monitoring and transparency of the initiative, but the NGO also makes significant efforts to ensure that its interests are not co-opted (or seen to be influenced) by private actors (Table 2, Q11).

In ICV’s work on the Mato Grosso PCI strategy, the NGO helped to develop indicators as part of a common vision for the state in 2030, reflected in 22 goals (Table 3). According to ICV, these goals were developed in a multi-stakeholder setting, and alignment with the SDGs was not considered the primary objective: it was sufficiently difficult trying to create locally-relevant indicators within Mato Grosso, with powerful stakeholders representing different interests,<sup>5</sup> again reflecting the efforts of local actors in having to deal with complex decisions and material trade-offs. However, the PCI goals do have some clear alignment with the SDGs (namely SDGs 1, 2, and 15), which reflects the discourse of powerful agribusiness players in setting targets and goals for

sustainability (Spann 2017), enacted at different levels of governance.

In their implementation, the PCI goals pay insufficient attention to the interlinkages and tensions between goals: trade-offs thus emerge in which issues are prioritised on the ground (with certain targets fulfilled, such as forest restoration; rather than targets related to complex political economic issues such as land rights).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, not only are the difficult decisions and trade-offs delegated to local organisations such as ICV, but the more complex and structural problems are sidestepped, while more straightforward and achievable targets are prioritised.

According to ICV, it was extremely difficult to develop monitoring indicators for socio-productive inclusion of smallholders in PCI, due to a lack of data held by the state government (Table 2, Q12). This lack of available data also highlights the problematic data architecture related to key criteria in the SDGs at the local level. When stakeholders such as the state government, MNE buyers or NGOs, and producers have insufficient, or differently defined metrics, this poses a significant challenge for measuring progress against the SDGs.

Despite their very different positions in global commodity networks, both organisations engage with multiple stakeholders and seek to occupy discursive multi-stakeholder spaces seeking to address complex sustainability

<sup>5</sup> Interview with ICV, December 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with ICV, December 2018.

problems, at different levels. Both organisations recognise the importance of collaboration, which is well-aligned with the language of the SDGs. Connectivity between different stakeholders can, allow for joint-learning, the co-creation of knowledge and allow for creativity; but risks diluting more scientifically-grounded ideas with more consensus-based decisions; fostering the homogenization of norms, in which actors carry out similar behaviours that they believe (but do not necessarily) lead to more sustainable outcomes (Biggs et al. 2015). Such multi-stakeholder spaces indicate some discursive convergence as ‘win–win’ goals are agreed upon, which blurs traditional distinctions between company, NGO and public actors.

### Framing of sustainability

We explored the ways in which the two organisations approach and define ‘sustainable’ cocoa production (Table 3), and the ways in which these approaches reflect their broader positions related to the sustainability of farming systems and their strategies for driving change. We found numerous alignments and divergences in the ways in which ICV and Unilever frame sustainability, with considerable variability both within and between the organisations.

However, an important point of divergence was that the two organisations encouraged different forms of ‘sustainable’ farming: ICV’s Socio-productive Networks project concentrates on agroecological production and agroforestry; and Unilever’s approach to sustainable intensification emphasises the need for “more cocoa on less land” (Unilever 2019k: 2). The principle of sustainable intensification underpins the SDGs as an important strategy for ending hunger and achieving sustainable use of ecosystems (Rasmussen et al. 2018), and follows the logic of the land sparing hypothesis: that intensifying agricultural production in existing areas will enable more effective conservation elsewhere. This language aligns well with ‘win–win’ solutions noted in sustainable development discourse, in which environmental harm may be solved through market-based instruments, or through greater productivity (e.g., Chaigneau and Brown 2016; Pokorny et al. 2012).

Conversely, agroecological and multifunctional agricultural methods have been found to be more sustainable and resilient than conventional methods for the availability and nutritional value of food (Spann 2017). Agroecological farming, that improves production by combining traditional and modern farming practices; combined with farmer choice over whether and how to interact with global food markets, could lead to transformations that achieve greater social justice and reduced poverty (Lade et al. 2017; MacDonald 2007). While Unilever’s approach may align well with the SDGs, alternative (and potentially more sustainable)

agroecological methods may be obscured due to current dominant narratives on sustainable intensification.

Furthermore, the PCI Initiative emphasises sustainable intensification and includes targets based on increased productivity of grains and livestock farming, rather than agroecological farming, or the farming/extraction of non-timber forest products (the focus of the socio-productive networks project). ICV stated that without appropriate territorial zoning, it will be a significant challenge for high-input agribusiness to coexist with organic family farmers or conservation units. ICV thus participates in diverse and somewhat conflicting strategies to influence governance at different levels.

Another important point of divergence was the organisations’ approaches to income diversification for farmers, linked to different framings of ‘resilience’ by (and within) Unilever and ICV. Unilever states that it is “committed to improving the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and their communities—in particular by helping them improve their agricultural practices and to look at income diversification” (Unilever 2019j), and the company is involved in various projects for diversifying income of cocoa farmers (Table 4), to reduce vulnerability to shocks such as poor harvests or price fluctuations. Despite these localised projects, the codified practices enshrined in Unilever’s global Sustainable Agriculture Code do not recognise diverse farm income as a factor in securing resilient and sustainable livelihoods. Rather, farmer resilience is encouraged through managing risk, through the development of farmer savings, insurance and support programmes, primarily in relation to climate (Unilever 2017a, b).

ICV’s socio-productive networks project focuses on a number of priority crops and farming activities, which allows the NGO to examine context-specific opportunities for diversifying incomes that are well-suited to particular farmers’ situations. There is thus an important tension, between strategies promoting diversity of farmers’ incomes, and those promoted in SDG 2 (to provide the maximum yields of particular crops), which may be through large-scale plantations.

While SDG 9 encourages the integration of small-scale business into value chains and markets, ICV and Unilever approach this differently. For example, ICV stated that when some small farmers are integrated into global supply chains they are become more vulnerable to price fluctuations. Although farmers are well connected and integrated into these supply chains, they do not have visibility of who they are dealing with, and feel that they have no power in negotiations. A central feature in ICV’s approach to sustainable farming includes encouraging farming groups to work collectively: the NGO supports family farms in joining co-ops that will grant them more power in negotiations with buyers; an approach which is largely absent in both the PCI strategy and in Unilever’s Sustainable Agriculture Code,

**Table 3** Alignment between PCI goals and the SDGs Source: PCI (2017)

PCI focus	PCI Goal	Related SDG(s)
Produce	Recovering 2.5 million hectares of low productivity pasture areas by 2030	2 <sup>a</sup>
	Increasing livestock productivity to 95 kg/ha/year by 2030	2
	Convert at least 12.5 million hectares of degraded pasture to grain crops by 2030	2
	Increase grain yield to 92 million tons by 2030	2
	Expand the area under sustainable forest management to 6 million hectares by 2030	2 (and 15 <sup>b</sup> )
	Increasing grain yield to 92 Mton by 2030	2
	Expanding the area of planted forests over in areas already open to 800 thousand ha by 2030	2
	Increase planted wood production to 11.75 Mm <sup>3</sup> by 2030	2
Conserve	Maintain 60% of Mato Grosso's native vegetation	15 <sup>b</sup>
	Reduce deforestation in the forest by 90% against the 2001–2010 baseline of 5.714 km <sup>2</sup> : (PRODES), reaching 571km <sup>2</sup> /year by 2030	15
	Reduce deforestation in the Cerrado by 95% against the 2001–2010 baseline of 3.016 km <sup>2</sup> (Secretary of State for the Environment), reaching 150 km <sup>2</sup> /year by 2030	15
	Eliminate illegal deforestation by 2020	15
	Conserve 1 million hectares of area subject to legal deforestation	15
	Registering 90% of rural properties with Cadastro Ambiental Rural by 2016	15
	Validate 100% of the Cadastro Ambiental Rural properties by 2018	15
	Recompose 1 million hectares (100%) of degraded Areas of Permanent Preservation by 2030	15
Include	Regularize 5.8 million hectares (100%) of Legal Reserve, 1.9 M ha of which through restoration, by 2030	15
	Expand Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Service	2
	Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Service to 100% of family farmers by 2030	2
	Increase share of family farming products in institutional markets to 30% by 2030	2
	Increase credit access to R\$ 1.3 billion/year by 2030	2
	Consolidate land regularization of 70% of family farming lots by 2030	1 <sup>c</sup> , 2

<sup>a</sup>Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

<sup>b</sup>Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

<sup>c</sup>Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

which appear better suited to large-scale farming, ‘sustainable intensification’ and plantation agriculture.

## Conclusion

Studying the strategies of Unilever and ICV in relation to ‘sustainable supply chains’ and ‘tropical forest protection’, demonstrates both alignment and variability between and within these organisations. This paper revealed the various ways in which Unilever and ICV participate in sustainability governance across different scales, and interact with multiple stakeholders and multi-stakeholder initiatives in diverse and strategic ways, producing variegated effects in different fora.

Instances of alignment were found between discourse used by Unilever and that of the SDGs, namely, through the encouragement of a model of sustainable agricultural intensification. This alignment of powerful agribusiness interests may obscure the consideration of alternative

agroecological farming models and bottom up approaches that emphasise diverse incomes, and local consumption markets.

Unilever’s strategies are well-aligned with the targets of the SDGs, and although the company has interacted at the local level in various contexts, it is still operating at a global scale. Participation in jurisdictional and landscape approaches may hold some potential to ensure more joined-up governance. Going forward, an important opportunity for affecting change is for commodity buyers to send a clear signal from buyers of Brazil’s agricultural products that sustainable practices are in demand to strengthen the case of civil society for conservation and good natural resource governance. Associated incentives could help balance the burden of responsibility for implementation between global and local actors: the delegation of responsibility to local NGOs to take on this role of promoting zero deforestation—without clear market incentives—may impede progress towards the SDGs.

**Table 4** ICV and Unilever's initiatives for 'sustainable' cocoa production and their features

	ICV	Unilever (2019d, k)
Type of farms covered	Family farms	Family farms, smallholders, large-scale plantations
Geographical scope	Mato Grosso, Brazil	Global; Cocoa and Forests Initiative focus on Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire
Initiatives, projects, and partnerships	Socio-productive networks PCI initiative (technical assistance for family farms)	Certifications: Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, UTZ The Cocoa and Forests Initiative (CFI) (led by the World Cocoa Foundation, the International Sustainability Unit (ISU) of HRH The Prince of Wales, and IDH—the Sustainable Trade Initiative) Smallholder projects ASPEN partnership that helps to diversify cocoa-farmers' incomes (supported by TRANSFORM—a joint initiative between Unilever and the UK's Department for International Development—and Cargill) Enhancing Livelihoods Fund (ELF) (a joint initiative between Unilever, Oxfam and the Ford Foundation) helping to diversify incomes of cocoa farmers
Key overlapping features	Deforestation-free Profitability Productivity and yield improvements Improved quality Risk minimisation Empowering women in supply chains Income diversification	Deforestation-free Profitability Productivity and yield improvements Improved quality Risk minimisation Empowering women in supply chains Income diversification (for smallholder projects)
Divergence	Agroecological production Agroforestry Organic management Focus on legal requirements Power in negotiations with buyers important Establishing farmers networks Inclusion in local markets Added value to raw commodities	Sustainable intensification Compliance with certification (and stronger certification promoted) Inclusion in global markets

Despite global SDG targets on deforestation and forest degradation and ambitious sustainability commitments of commodity buyers, ICV is ultimately tasked with dealing with complex issues, such as addressing the challenges of (indirect) supplier exclusions and spillover effects while dealing with hostile political contexts. The organisation represents certain government and private interests, but is viewed by commodity producers as representing a non-market friendly 'NGO agenda' in enactments of corporate zero deforestation commitments.

The discursive resources used by the organisations reflect the diverse and contested power dynamics at play in the implementation of agendas of sustainable supply chains and tropical forest protection. Both organisations acknowledge the "structural effect" of the state (Mitchell 1991: 81), as the state interacts with sustainability strategies in complementary and conflicting ways, such as through jurisdictional approaches that may strengthen

policy coherence, or in practical instances of indicator-setting, where baseline data are lacking. It is thus not a dichotomous relationship between the state and non-state actors, and different degrees of 'stateness' are reproduced at different sites of governance for sustainability, with different outcomes. Furthermore, this paper revealed the blurred distinctions between public, private, and NGO actors in promoting sustainable supply chains and tropical forest protection. Understanding the processes and consequences of different (combinations of) actors' sustainability strategies—as well as the extent to which they are responsible and accountable—is thus critical for ensuring effective governance for the SDGs.

Future scholarly work could include further in-depth interviews and participant observation with diverse stakeholders involved in the various multiple stakeholder and zero deforestation initiatives to better map the networks and diverse discursive strategies and power relations between



stakeholders in environmental governance. This would shed light into new emerging jurisdictional approaches and the extent to which they are able to incentivise more sustainable production practices and strengthen governances in ways that minimise potential spillover effects or displace impacts geographically.

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